Our Appointment with Life

By Thich Nhat Hanh

Dear Sangha, today is the sixteenth of July, 1998, and this is the first Dharma talk for the Summer Opening. I would like to invite the young people to meet together today, in order to discuss how to profit from the practice, from the Summer Opening, because there must be things that you like to do for your practice to be more fruitful, more joyful; and we have to meet about that. So the young people will find time to meet today and discuss these issues: do you like to practice with grown-up people, and how much do you want to share their practice? Of course, as young people you like to be together as a group, and you may like to have practices of your own, but from time to time you would also like to participate in the activities of other people. So, discuss how much you want to do on your own, and how much you want to do with other groups of people. Then I would like you to discuss joy and difficulties in your daily life, because I would like to know more about your daily life in order to offer the appropriate teaching and practices.

What are the kinds of difficulties you encounter in your daily life, in your family, in school? Please have a very thorough discussion, and write down all the kinds of difficulties that you encounter at home and in school. We have to be able to call these difficulties by their true names: what you don't like to happen in school, what you don't like to see happening in your family. I need you very much to tell me what kinds of difficulties you encounter at home, or in school, or in society. And then I would like you to tell me also about your daily joy and happiness, what kind of things you like in your family, in school and in society. Take time to sit quietly and recall, and to think, not as an individual but as a group, and each person will help the others to remember what kind of joy, what kind of happiness, what you like that happens at home, in society, in school. It is the opposite of what we just discussed before, when we mentioned what we dislike, and don't what to happen. The second topic is what is happening that you really like, in school, in society and in your family. Thirdly, I think this is important, what you really like, but it has not happened…what you wish to happen, but it has not happened, and what you think would be the conditions for it to happen.

I think you can discuss this among yourselves, as the young people, and then you can talk with other people, grownup people, and you will have a deeper view, a clearer view about what has been happening, and why the things you wish for have not happened. This discussion is already the practice of meditation, because to me, to meditate means to be still and to look deeply into our situation, to really find out what is there in our situation. And when you sit down together calmly and practice looking together, you will begin to see things more clearly. I would like you to record all that you have seen in your practice of collective looking.

I know that life is difficult sometimes, and as a young person you have already suffered. But the Buddha says that there is always a way out of suffering, but you cannot see that way out of suffering unless you see very clearly the nature of your difficulties. You are only eleven, or twelve, or thirteen, but you already suffer. You are fourteen, fifteen, or sixteen; you are almost an adult, yet you have the impression that life is already very difficult. All my life I have been in touch with young people. I have managed to always be in touch with young people. I like to listen to them, I like to understand their suffering, their difficulties; that is why I am very interested in hearing more about what is really happening, and you are the ones who can help me. In retreats that I organize in many countries, I always welcome the young people to come and to practice with us. The presence of young people makes the retreats very alive. Your practice of looking deeply together will be a great help to me. However, if you think that today you cannot

finish that practice of looking deeply at your difficulties and your joys, you can organize other meetings tomorrow and after tomorrow. And the fruit of your practice will be enjoyed by other groups that come after you. So please note, first of all, how much you want to practice with the adults, and how much you want to practice as a young group; the difficulties, the suffering that you encounter in your daily life, at home, at school, and in society; the kind of joy and happiness that you are able to have every day in school, in society, and at home; and finally, what you like, what you think to be wonderful, to be uplifting, to be nourishing, but which have not happened yet; and what kind of conditions you think you need in order for these things to happen.

For the very young people, I would like them to draw a wave for me, on paper. Do you know what a wave is? A wave is what you observe when you look at the ocean, at a river. You know that a wave is made of water. Try to draw the water also. It is very difficult—I don't know whether you can draw the water. I am sure that you can draw a wave, but without having succeeded in drawing in a wave, try to draw water. You think you can do it? There is one child who had drawn a wave, and I asked her, "What about the water?" She was very intelligent, and she pointed at the wave and she said, "This is water." But you may have other ideas. We know that water and wave cannot be separated. Sometimes the water is still, and sometimes it is not still. When it is not still, the water becomes waves. And when the water becomes still, what does it become? Can you draw it?

We have a poem that helps us to practice: "Breathing in, I see myself as a flower; breathing out, I feel fresh." And the young people can practice this. You breathe in and you visualize your self as a flower. "Breathing in, I see myself as a flower; breathing out, I feel fresh." I think the grownup people can practice this too. It's easy to see children as flowers. Everything in the child looks like a flower: their eyes are a kind of flower, their nose is a kind of flower too, their mouths, their hands, their feet, their faces look like flowers. So it would not be difficult to visualize yourself as a flower, because you are a flower by yourself. "Breathing in, I see myself as a flower." A flower is always fresh and beautiful. And that is one of the reasons I like to have children with us during retreats. These are flowers…we want to decorate the retreat with flowers, and children are also beautiful flowers. "Breathing in, I see myself as a flower; breathing out, I feel fresh." The grownup people are also flowers, but many of them don't know how to maintain their flower-ness. That is why their flower is somehow a little bit tired. So this practice is to restore your flower-ness, so that you'll be fresh again. You know that you can be fresh, like children, but because many of us have not had the opportunity to learn how to maintain our flower-ness, our flower has suffered. We also have beautiful eyes like children, but because we have cried so much, we did not sleep well so many nights, our eyes look tired. But if you know how to take care of your eyes, they will become flowers again. And so with your face, your face was originally a flower, but because you have not taken good care of your flower-ness, an expression of despair and fatigue makes your face look less than a flower. So this practice is very helpful: "Breathing in, I see myself as a flower"—you restore your flower-ness. "Breathing out, I feel fresh."

The second exercise is: "Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain." Believe it or not, inside of you there is a mountain, the element of solidity, stability—you cannot take the mountain out of you. There is a mountain in you: the capacity to be solid, to be stable.

Because we have not taken care of our mountain, we have lost a lot of that element of stability and solidity within us. So sit like a mountain again, learn how to sit like a mountain again, learn the half-lotus position, learn the lotus position, or learn the chrysanthemum position. Do you know what the chrysanthemum position is? That is the position that you find the most comfortable, with or without a cushion. So, "Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain; breathing out, I feel solid." Do you know that the sitting position is one of the most beautiful positions of the human body? A half-lotus, lotus or chrysanthemum—find a position that fits you the best, using a cushion or two. Your cushion might be more or less thick, but you have to try in order to find the cushion that fits you. When you have found the position, your chrysanthemum position with the cushion, I am sure you can sit for at least twenty minutes like a mountain. And sitting like that is a wonderful way to restore your mountain. We suffer because we are less than a mountain. We are shaky, we are vulnerable, but there is a mountain in us, and we have to restore it, and to practice sitting meditation is one of the ways to do it.

Children are capable of sitting also; if they don't sit half an hour, then they can sit two minutes, or three minutes. I'm sure all of you can sit like a mountain for two or three minutes. I'd like to see each of you sitting in that position, then someone can take a picture of you as a mountain, like this, smiling: " Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain;

breathing out, I feel solid." Solidity is one basic condition for happiness. If you are not solid, you suffer. So, restoring the element of solidity within you means that you can be happy right away. "Flower fresh, mountain solid."

(Bell)

Enjoy your breathing!

First of all, "Flower fresh, and then mountain solid." Now we come to the third exercise: "Water reflecting." "Breathing in I see myself as still water." You know still water is not a wave. Sometimes you enjoy being a wave—it's very wonderful to be a wave, coming up very high, and going down very low. But sometimes you are tired, you don't want to be a wave anymore. You just want to be still water. To be still water is also a great joy—you feel peaceful, you feel quiet, and you enjoy the peace and the quietness that is in you. I know the young people like to be waves, but they should know that it is also wonderful to be still water. Have you seen a pond that is very still? You look into the water and you see reflected in the water the blue sky, the clouds, the trees. You can even take a picture of the sky and the clouds just by pointing your camera at the water, because still water reflects things perfectly. Still water does not distort things. When you are not still, you distort things. When your mind is not still, you distort everything. The other person did not hate you, but you believe that she hated you. That is a distortion, because your "water," your mind, is not still. Therefore it is very important to practice so that your mind becomes still water. And now you know why I asked you to draw still water. "Breathing in, I see myself as still water; breathing out, I reflect things as they are." This is very important. We should not be victims of our wrong perceptions. In order for our perceptions not to be wrong, our minds should be still, like water. And there are ways to help your mind to become like still water.

The last exercise is: "Breathing in, I see myself as space; breathing out, I feel free." Space is very important. Imagine a bird without space. A bird without space could not fly; it would have to die. We humans are like birds: if there is no space around us we cannot move. If there is no place inside our hearts we also cannot move. So it is very important to practice in order to give us a lot of space inside, to practice in order to give our beloved one space so that she can move, so she can breathe. That is the practice of love. So you can ask yourself whether you love him, or whether you love her. If you love him, if you love her, you'll give him or her a lot of space, both inside and around him or her. It is very important to bring space into ourselves, and to restore space around us. And we will learn how to do it together.

I would like everyone to sing with me the song: "Flower Fresh," so that we memorize it, and we will begin to learn to practice like a flower, a mountain, still water, and space.

Breathing in, breathing out,

Breathing in, breathing out,

I am blooming as a flower,

I am fresh as the dew.

I am solid as a mountain,

I am firm as the earth.

I am free.

Breathing in, breathing out.

Breathing in, breathing out.

I am water, reflecting

What is real, what is true.

And I feel there is space,

Deep inside of me.

I am free, I am free, I am free.

Shall we sing it once more? I think we have to sing it in French.

Quand j'inspire, quand j'expire,

Quand j'inspire, quand j'expire,

Je me sens comme une fleur,

Aussi fraiche que la rose est.

Je suis solide comme une montagne,

Je suis firme, comme la terre.

Je suis libre.

Quand j'inspire, quand j'expire,

Quand j'inspire, quand j'expire

Je suis l'eau reflectante

Ce qui est vrai, ce qui est beau.

Et je sens il y a de l'espace

Tres profonde en moi

Liberte, liberte, liberte.

I think we have other versions ready…today we shall learn the Italian version, the Vietnamese, and so on. Now I think it is time for the very young people to stand up and to bow to the Sangha and go out.

The transformation and healing we are looking for is not outside of us, it is in us. It is like the wave: if it wants to be still, the stillness should not be obtained from the outside, it is in the water itself.

We have the capacity to be a wave, but we also have the capacity to be still water. So we look for peace, we look for stability, we look for well being within ourselves, and these things are not something that we can acquire from outside. But maybe there are those of us who are only used to being waves, and we have forgotten how to become still water again. We know that we have the capacity of becoming still water again, but we have forgotten how to do it. That is why we need the practice. We need a teacher who will tell us how to restore our stability, our stillness. We need a Dharma brother, a Dharma sister, we need a Sangha in order to learn how to be stable and still again. Peace is first of

all something that you are, not exactly something you do. That is why we like to use the expression "being peace," the way to be peace. Peace is there, only if we allow it to be, then it will be. Because we have not allowed peace to be, that is why peace is impossible. We cannot say that peace is not there, peace is there somehow, but we have to allow it to manifest. It's like in a wave—there is water, and the capacity of the water to be still is there inside the wave. That is why learning how to be peace, to allow peace to be, is very important. There is a kind of energy that is pushing us day and night, preventing our becoming peace. Within Buddhism that energy is called *vasana,* meaning, "habit energy." And we have to learn how to recognize it. We don't have to fight it, we have to learn how to recognize it in our daily life, and when we are able to recognize it and smile to it, it will lose its energy, and allow us not to be carried away by it. *Vasana*," *tap khi*, this is like *chi gong*, khi energy, and "tap" means what you have learned so that it becomes a habit, so we translate it as "habit energy."

We have more than enough intelligence to know that if we say these words, then we will damage our relationship with the other person. Yet when the time comes, we cannot be ourselves--we say it. We know that we should not do it, because if we do it will cause damage to our relationship, and yet we do it. We say, "It was stronger than I am." What was stronger than you were? It is the habit energy. We know very well that we should not say these things, that we should not do these things; we know very clearly that saying it will destroy our relationship, will cause a lot of damage. Yet we find ourselves in the situation, and we say it, or we do it. And after the destruction, after the damage has been done, we regret a lot, and we say, "Why have I said that, done it? I already knew that if I said it, if I did it, I would cause damage, and yet I have said it, I have done it." And we promise to ourselves that we will not do it again, we will not say it again. We know that we are very sincere in that moment we want to begin anew. "That is the last time that will happen. I will never repeat that again." Yet, because the habit energy is always there, when you find yourself in the same kind of situation, you will say it again, you will do it again. And the damage continues, we know that it takes several months to repair the damage, yet it will take only a few minutes to cause the damage. We have learned the lesson, yet we cannot practice it, because the habit energy is so strong.

We are taught to practice mindfulness in order to recognize the habit energy every time it manifests. Mindfulness is also a kind of energy, the kind of energy that can help us become aware of what is going on, as when I look at my hand and I know that I am looking at my hand, that is mindfulness of looking. When I drink some water and I know that I am drinking water, that is mindfulness of drinking. When I walk, if I know that I am walking, that is mindfulness of walking. When I breathe, if I know that I am breathing, that is mindfulness of breathing. That is the practice that we do in Plum Village, in order to generate the energy of mindfulness. And the energy of mindfulness is the only kind of energy that can recognize the habit energy every time it is manifested. That is why the practice of mindful walking, mindful breathing, mindful eating is very important, because every moment you practice mindfulness of walking, or eating or breathing, you generate, you cultivate that energy of mindfulness in you. That energy is so important because it will help you to recognize what is going on, and therefore when the habit energy is manifested, we know right away. "Hello there, my habit energy, I know you." And you just smile to it, and then it cannot do anything to you anymore. There is no fight. It is not necessary to fight. The Buddhist way is very gentle, very non-violent. Just become aware of that habit, smile to it, "My dear friend, I know you," that is all, and your habit energy might go back to store consciousness a little weaker. And next time when it manifests itself you will say, "My dear little habit energy, I know you are there. I will take good care of you." Then it will go back to the store consciousness again.

I would like to tell you the story of a young man who came from America and practiced here, I think more than ten years ago. During the first three weeks, he enjoyed the practice so much. He enjoyed stability and joy during practice, because the practice of the Sangha in the Upper Hamlet was so strong. He was supported by monks and lay people who practiced here in the Upper Hamlet, and he was quite happy. One day he was sent by his fellow American practitioners to Ste. Foy-la-Grande, the town nearby, to do some shopping, because on that day we organized a Thanksgiving Day, and each national group was supposed to cook a dish typical of that nation to be placed on the ancestral altar. And he was sent by his American friends to Ste. Foy-la-Grande to do the shopping. It was the first time he had left the Upper Hamlet to go to a city. During the time he was shopping, he suddenly realized that he was rushing; there was no calm or stability anymore, because he wanted to get things done quickly. And that was not pleasant, because in the three weeks before he had not had that kind of feeling, that kind of energy. But since he had been practicing mindful breathing, he was able to recognize that the energy of rushing was in him, the energy of wanting to get things done very quickly was in him. He was capable of seeing that that energy had been transmitted to him by his mother, because his mother was always like that, always rushing and wanting to get things done very

quickly. At that point he took a deep in-breath, and he said, "Hello, Mommy." And suddenly the energy of rushing was no longer there. And he knew that without the Sangha around him he should practice strongly, and he followed his mindful breathing until he finished the shopping, and from that moment on the energy of rushing was no longer with him.

When you are supported by a strong Sangha and a strong practice, the practice becomes very easy, and negative habit energies will have no occasion to manifest themselves. But when you find yourself alone, and you are not supported by the collective energy, these negative habit energies can spring up and manifest themselves, and you have to be equipped with enough mindfulness in order to be able to recognize them, and not to let them lead you and push you to do things that you don't want to do, to say things that you don't want to say.

When you practice mindful breathing and mindful walking, you allow peace to be. The negative energies are still in you, but they do not manifest themselves. If you continue, if your practice works out, then the negative energies will be transformed little by little in the depth of your consciousness. They are transformed in two ways. The first way is that when they manifest themselves, you recognize them, you smile to them, and every time you do that they will go back to the form of seeds in the lower level of your consciousness and they will lose some of their strength, through the phenomenon of discharge. Your habit energy will still be there, but it will lose a little bit of strength every time it is embraced by your mindfulness. So the next time it manifests itself, you do the same, you embrace it, you recognize it, and it loses a little bit of strength and it goes back to the lower level of your consciousness. And that is the first way to help it to transform.

The second way is that you continue to cultivate the energy of peace, the energy of mindfulness, and during one hour of walking meditation or mindful breathing, you nourish and you cultivate the energy of peace and mindfulness in you, because the energies of peace and mindfulness also have their own seeds in the lower level of your consciousness. And these seeds continue to grow in you, and when they are important, they know how to take care of the opposite kinds of seeds. You don't have to directly touch the negative seeds. You cultivate only the positive energies in you, and during the time you sleep, during your daily life, the positive seeds, the seeds of peace and stability, will know how to take care of the negative seeds, and there will also be a transformation, even if you don't directly deal with them. I have many stories to tell about this.

When I was first exiled from my country in 1966, when the war in Vietnam had become very intense, I had to leave the country for a few months in order to go to Europe and the United States to advocate for a cease-fire, for the stopping of the war. Because I tried to speak with the voice of the victims of the war and not the voice of the warring parties, I was not allowed to go home, and I was exiled from my own country. It was very hard for me. At that time all my friends were in Vietnam, all my work was in Vietnam, and it was very difficult to survive if I did not go home. Everything in Europe and America was very strange to me. There were no Vietnamese refugees abroad yet. I had to travel extensively in order to speak about the situation in Vietnam, and I stayed two or three days in each city. Sometimes I woke up during the night and I did not know what city or what country I was in, because of the extensive speaking tour.

During the first year of my exile I used to dream of going home. The same dream came back again and again. Usually I saw a beautiful hill, a green hill, with beautiful trees and little houses on it, and I was climbing on it. I knew that everything I loved was on that hill: my friends, my work, the people I loved, they were all on that hill. And always, halfway up, there was something preventing me climbing anymore. And I always woke up at that moment, and realized I was exiled. The same kind of dream came back again and again. But at that time I was already practicing mindfulness, recognizing what was happening in the present moment. I learned to appreciate the trees, the birds, the fruits, the people, and the children in Europe and America. In Vietnam we had different kinds of trees, fruit and birds. I spent time with children in Germany, in France, in England and in America, and I talked to and made friends with pastors, Catholic priests and all those who would like to support me in helping end the war. I continued to make friends; I continued to learn how to appreciate what was there in the present moment. The practice brought fruit, because that dream did not come back any more. It looks like I have adopted this part of the world as my home also. I did not meditate on the dream. No, I did not analyze my dream. I did not invite my dream up in order to have a talk with it, I did not do any of that work. I just tried to live mindfully each minute of my daily life in Europe and in America, and I was able to touch what was wonderful, beautiful, refreshing here in this part of the world, and I

cultivated this kind of joy and relationship. It was exactly that joy and relationship that took care of my pain of being in exile, and I experienced a transformation deep down in store consciousness. I did not work on it intellectually at all.

So transformation and healing can happen in two ways: the first way is that you directly embrace it and look deeply into it. The second way is to just cultivate the positive energy of peace, of solidity, of joy, and then they will know how to take care of the negative energy within you. So, the habit energy that we have within us…if we allow it to continue to push us in our daily life, then we will continue to create suffering for ourselves, and suffering even for those we love. That is why we have to learn how to be able to recognize and to transform it, and you know already that the factor that can recognize that habit energy, the factor that can embrace that energy and help it to transform, is the energy of mindfulness. That is why one hour of mindfulness practice is one hour of cultivating that energy. That is why, when we come to Plum Village, we should invest our time and our energy in the practice of mindfulness, so that when we go home we will be able to continue, because that is the only energy that can help us with transformation and healing. I used to tell Catholic and Protestant friends that, to me, the energy of mindfulness is equivalent to the energy of the Holy Spirit, and we are capable of generating that Holy Spirit within ourselves.

(bell)

Habit energy manifests itself several times a day. If you are attentive, you will recognize it, in your way of walking, for instance. There is a belief that what you are looking for is not here, it is somewhere in the future. You believe that the things you want, whether it is peace, or happiness, or stability or freedom or God or the Buddha, are not available in the here and the now. So there is a belief that you have to look for them somewhere else, or in the future. That is why the way you walk is conditioned by that kind of belief. You walk as if peace and happiness are not available in the here and the now. That habit energy can be seen in every step you make. You run…and we have been running for a long time, not only during this life, but in previous lives we have been running, because the habit of running was there in our ancestors and in our parents. They still continue to run in us. Even when we sit down and eat our lunch, they continue to run, to run inside. We are not capable of eating our lunch in peace. There are those of us who practice strongly—once they sit down, they want to be there. And they want to enjoy their lunch with the brothers and sisters who have come, and to enjoy the practice with them. There is a strong determination to stop in the here and the now, and to live deeply this moment of your daily life. So, sitting like a mountain, do not allow the past and the future to carry you away. Bring your mind back to your body, and sit there as if sitting there is the most important thing of your life. And when you eat your lunch, eat your lunch in such a way that peace and joy are possible. And in order to really do that, you have to stop running.

When one hundred people, three hundred people are sitting together and eating lunch together, a number of us are capable of sitting still in the present moment, not allowing any projects, any worries to invade us. Just sitting there and establishing ourselves in the here and the now, because sitting with the Sangha is a joy, by itself. While we eat, we touch deeply the food that is a gift of earth and sky, of the cosmos, and we just enjoy our sitting and our eating, our breathing. We enjoy our life, expressed in our presence and in the presence of brothers and sisters who surround us. The only condition for that to be possible is to stop running. We have been running for a long time, and even during our sleep we continue to run. Learning to stop is the most important practice of Buddhist meditation. To stop on the ground of the insight that what you are looking for is already there in the present moment, in the here and the now. The Buddha was very clear about it. Do not allow the past to get you, don’t be attached to the past because the past is already gone. Do not allow the future, worries about the future, to get you, because the future is not yet here. There is only one moment for you to be truly alive, and that is the present moment. All the wonders of life can be touched in that moment. So the Buddha was clear on that. Everything belonging to life is there in the present moment; the blue sky, the beautiful face of your child is there, available in the present moment. If you get lost in the future, in worries about the future, or in sorrow about the past, life will not be available to you. So the basic condition is to go back to the present moment, to allow yourself to be touched by the wonders of life.

There are elements that are beautiful, refreshing and healing. If we allow ourselves to be touched by these elements, we can restore our well being, our peace. How can we do that, unless we learn how to stop running, to allow our bodies to rest, to be in the here and now, and to allow our mind to be present, to touch life. And this is our practice. When we find ourselves alone, and try to practice according to the teachings in a book, it may be difficult. But when we find ourselves in a Sangha where everybody is doing that, then it will be very easy, like walking meditation. You know that

the monks and the nuns and the lay people who are permanent residents in Plum Village practice walking meditation every day. Every time they need to go from one place to another place, even if the distance is only two or three meters, they always practice walking meditation. There is no other style of walking but mindful walking. You walk in such a way that every step can bring you solidity and peace. It is not only during retreats that we practice like that, but outside of retreats we always walk like that, because you can enjoy every step you make. Every step, make it more solid. Every step, make it more peaceful. And you cultivate peace and solidity with every step you make. If you are a visitor coming to Plum Village, and you see everyone is walking that way, then you can do it very easily because you are reminded by everyone. Everyone is a bell of mindfulness, calling you back to the practice of mindful walking. And when you walk, and experience the peace and the joy, you become a bell of mindfulness yourself. And when we see you walking like that, we have confidence. If it happens that we get lost in our worries, in the past, in the future, and we see you walking like that, we have a chance to come back to the here and the now and enjoy our steps also. That is the virtue of a Sangha.

What we enjoy here in Plum Village, when we come, is the presence of the Sangha. A teacher without a Sangha cannot do much. Therefore, take refuge in the Sangha, have confidence in the Sangha, surrender yourself to the Sangha, and allow the Sangha to transport you like a boat on the ocean. That is our practice. Don’t worry, we know that our practice is to cultivate mindfulness. That is why during the time of eating, we eat in such a way that mindfulness is there. It means body and mind united, you are really there in the present moment, and you enjoy your lunch, and you enjoy the brothers and sisters around you. Please do not think of the past, of the future, of anything—just sit there, allow yourself to be there. Simply being there, eat in such a way that peace and happiness are possible, and the place will become the Pure Land, the Kingdom of God. Whether the place is Hell or the Kingdom of God depends entirely on you. If you can dwell in the here and the now, if you can let peace and solidity and freedom be the energies nourishing you in that moment, then the piece of land you are walking on, sitting on, is the Pure Land, the Kingdom of God. Everything depends on us.

In the meditation hall, we sit and we walk. What is the purpose of sitting and walking? Sitting is to cultivate our stability, our solidity. The sitting is not an exercise for you to arrive at a certain state of mind. This means that you have to enjoy the sitting, sitting just for sitting. And the moment when you enjoy the sitting, joy and stability become a reality already. When we are a wave, let us be a real wave. When we want to be still water, we can enjoy being still water. To be a wave is wonderful, but to be still water is also wonderful. Sitting is to allow our bodies to be quiet, to be solid, and to allow our minds to be at one with our bodies. While we sit we might enjoy our breathing, because our breathing will bring our minds and bodies together, and will help keep our minds and bodies together. Every moment of our sitting and breathing can be a moment of joy and peace. If you sit as though at hard labor, it will not result in anything at all. So the problem is not to sit a lot, but to enjoy the sitting, and to make the sitting pleasant.

We should use our intelligence in order to do sitting meditation. It is like when you stand and contemplate a beautiful sunset. If I ask you, "What is the purpose of standing here and looking at a sunset?" you don’t see any purpose--you just stand there enjoying the beautiful sunset. Sitting is like that. If someone says, "Why do you sit like that? What is the purpose of sitting like that?" you could say, "I just enjoy sitting." That is the best way of sitting, to just enjoy sitting. You know, when Nelson Mandela, the president of South Africa, first came for an official visit to France, he was met by the press, and the members of the press asked him what he would most like to do now, and he said, "Just sit down, because since the time I got out of prison I have not had a chance to sit down and do nothing." And now Plum Village offers you that opportunity, just to sit down and do nothing. Sitting down and doing nothing like that, if you enjoy it, will promote a lot of transformation and healing.

So in our Dharma discussions, please do not venture into areas of speculation, but bring our experiences together related to how we can better enjoy our sitting, our breathing, our walking and our eating together. The energy that helps you to succeed in enjoyment is mindfulness, because mindfulness is the capacity of being there, body and mind united, so that you can touch life deeply in that moment.

The energy of mindfulness can be generated by mindful walking, it can be generated by mindful breathing. It can be generated by doing things, or by mindful eating, mindful working, mindful walking, mindful sitting, mindful breathing. Mindfulness as I define it is the energy that can help you to be there, in the here and the now. From time to time, we see a person sit there, but he is not really there. His body is there, but he is completely absent. We can come and pat

on his shoulder and say, "Anybody home?" and then he’ll come back to us. So mindfulness is to be there, body and mind united in the here and the now. Mindfulness is the capacity to recognize what is there. Because you have to be there first, and when you are there something else is also there, and that is life. The beautiful sunset is not for you if you are not there. The blue sky is not for you if you are not there. And the multitude of wonderful, refreshing and healing elements will not be for you if you are not there. This by itself is a gift, because when you love someone, the most precious thing you would like to offer to her or to him is your presence, because how can you love unless you are there? Please look deeply to see it: the most valuable gift you can make to your beloved one is your presence. Therefore, to be present means to be loving. "Darling I am here for you." That is the most meaningful statement of love. If you are not there, if you are always absent, if the place you are used to going is the past or the future, then you cannot love. When you are there, you can offer your presence as a gift, and then you can do something else, you can recognize the presence of your beloved one: "Darling, I know you are there, and I am very happy." To be loved means to be recognized as existing. If you are too busy, if you are not there, then the person that you love will have the feeling that she is ignored by you, she does not mean anything to you. That is why, when you are there, you are in a position to recognize what is there, and what is there is your beloved one, it is life. The Buddha said, life is available only in the here and now, and your appointment with life is in the present moment. If you miss the present moment, you risk your appointment with life. So the teaching is very clear and also very simple: that we should train ourselves to go home to the here and the now, and touch deeply the life that is available in that moment. And everything we do, walking, sitting, breathing, eating, is to realize that.

(Three bells)